

# YIRAS SHOMAYIM: THE G-D-FEARER

*by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene*

## *The Mitzvah:*

Yiras shamayim, Fear of [G-d in] Heaven is one of the essentials of Jewish living (Deuteronomy 8:6) and one of the six constant commandments that a Jew is able to be performed at every moment in his life.

Yosef freed his brothers from prison and gave them instructions with the assurance "Do this and live; for I fear G-d" (Bereishis 42:14). With this, Yosef informed them that he was not an idol-worship but was a believer in G-d and was a G-d-fearing person.

What is the significance of whether man fears G-d? Why should "fear of G-d" be used in man's definition of self? And if so essential, what then, are the components to this heavenly fear?

Man only has jurisdiction over his free will - nothing more and nothing less. "The only thing G-d has [from man] in this world is yiras shamayim" (Shabbos 31a-31b). "Everything [in this world] is in the hands of Heaven - except for the fear of Heaven" (Berachos 33b).

Some fears in life are innate. But, quite surprisingly, fear of G-d is not - meaning that awareness of G-d's Omnipotence is no guarantee that a person will automatically take this to heart and act accordingly. Precisely because yiras shamayim is the key to exercising man's free will it is excluded from within man, unless and until he internalizes this within himself. Its acquisition is dependent upon the individual.

The burning question is: will he incorporate this "G-d-fearing element" into his existence? Where acquired and rooted within his psyche, it opens up the path to attain the true reward of Torah and mitzvah observance. It anchors his life to that of mitzvah observance, to serve G-d and distance himself from sin (Rav Yitzchak Blazer, Mamar Shaarei Ohr 2-3). Being "G-d-fearing" is the stepping-stone to mitzvah observance. "The sum of the matter ...fear G-d and keep his commandments" (Koheles 12:13).

Without it, there is nothing. With it, man has everything.

This is to impact upon every aspect of the person's existence. Such fear typically takes on two forms.

The first level of such fear is Yiras Ha'onesh, "fear of the [divine] punishment" for transgressing G-d's command. Who knows man's every action. But the higher, second level is Yiras Haroi'mimus, "fear and awe of [G-d's] Exaltedness". It is not awe of retribution that deters him from sin but the

trepidation that an iniquity damages his relationship with the Infinite, Omnipotent Creator. Accordingly, the individual is to avoid anything that might bring him into conflict from his dedication to bring glory to his Creator (Mesillas Yeshorim Ch.24).

This philosophy indelibly takes over and molds his entire perspective on life - to pursuing a life dedicated to serving G-d. It underpins morality and his vision of life. So the worse indictment of a society is the condemnation that it is "not G-d-fearing" as in Avraham's stinging rebuke of Avimelech and the Pelishtim (Bereishis 20:11). No meaningful moral restraints exist in a society where fear of G-d is absent. Appropriately, the description of Amalek, the Jewish nation's nemesis, is "the one who did not fear G-d" (Devarim 25:18).

Yosef's fear was apparent from not succumbing to the seductive advances of Potiphar's wife. The highest accolade, as stressed by Yosef, is to be called "G-d-fearing" as the angel told Avraham after the supreme test of the Binding of Yitzchak (Bereishis 22:12). The "woman of valor" is not praised for her grace or beauty but for her fear of G-d (Mishlei 31:30).

For a Jew, to be considered a yarei shamayim, a G-d-fearer, is therefore the highest badge of honor one can hold. Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).